



neighborhoods

City of Pittsburgh
Allegheny County
SWPA Region
Beyond SWPA

East Liberty

The East Liberty neighborhood in Pittsburgh's East End lies between Shadyside and Highland Park, and ties multiple neighborhoods together through intersecting corridors including Penn Avenue, Centre Avenue, Baum Boulevard, Negley Avenue, and Highland Avenue. The neighborhood's history was greatly affected by suburban sprawl of the mid-19th century, and the attempts to revive it afterwards. While East Liberty is still a far cry from its former state as a thriving commercial district, there are many new projects, both commercial and residential, that are adding to the transformation of the neighborhood. Recent development projects include The Home Depot and Whole Foods Market, and plans for a new Eastside Center include Walgreens and Starbucks as anchors. As part of this plan, a pedestrian walkway connecting East Liberty to Shadyside will be built.

In addition to larger tenants, there are also a number of successful privately-owned businesses in the area including the popular spots Red Room Café, Shadow Lounge, and Abay (Pittsburgh's only Ethiopian restaurant). There are also a growing number of design and décor businesses opening in the area, and on Penn Avenue there are numerous clothing and shoe stores. About five blocks north of the business district is the residential area of East Liberty. ELDI is currently working to develop mixed-income housing; they are redeveloping some homes for sale or rent at market value in order to attract new residents while being careful not to displace those that are already there. Another ELDI project involves converting structures throughout the district,



Penn Avenue Commercial District



East Liberty Presbyterian Church

from mansions to row houses, into low-income scattered-site housing, as well as renovating some "exceptional housing" throughout the residential neighborhood into energy-efficient market rate homes. Yearly energy bills for these homes are estimated at around \$1000, which will allow residents to put more of their income towards mortgages. All of these efforts are undertaken with the hope and expectation of spin-off

investments (once potential residents and investors see improvements that ELDI and others are making in the area, there is hope that they will be more inclined to invest in the area).

East Liberty is a neighborhood with a proud past as an important commercial district, not only in the City of Pittsburgh, but all of Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, with the migration of people to the suburbs and the ultimately unsuccessful "urban renewal" revitalization attempts, the neighborhood suffered years of disinvestment. Through the efforts of ELDI to improve the commercial and residential districts, East Liberty has a chance at transforming into a modern day version of its former self.

History of East Liberty

After its inception in the 1850s, East Liberty was an enormously successful business district. At its peak in 1950, East Liberty ranked as the 3rd largest in the state behind Philadelphia and Downtown Pittsburgh, and became the playground for some of Pittsburgh's wealthiest residents (including Mellon and Westinghouse) who lived nearby and owned property in East Liberty. Evidence of investment can be seen in the East Liberty Presbyterian Church and the Eastminster Presbyterian Church.

The success of the business district at that time grew due to its location amidst wealthy neighborhoods, the convenience of transportation along major roads, and the third largest rail station in Pennsylvania. During the 1960s, the flight of people moving to homes in the suburbs had a negative impact on businesses in East Liberty, causing many to close. The wealthy patrons reacted to the closing shops with an urban renewal project that many thought would preserve East Liberty as the thriving neighborhood it had been. The objective of this project was to create a suburban feel, in order to mimic the experience that people could have in autooriented



Sprout Fund Public Art Mural by
Jordan Monahan, 2004
5900 Penn Avenue



Star Optical Building at Highland & Penn



Kelly Strayhorn Theatre



The Shadow Lounge



developments outside of the city where shopping malls were becoming popular. Large tracts of land were assembled to create parking lots on the periphery of the East Liberty commercial district and Penn and Highland Avenues were closed to create a pedestrian mall.

The Penn Circle Highway, which forms a ring around the central business district and was created in order to allow for easier access to the business district, actually allows shoppers to bypass the neighborhood altogether. Awkward intersections and crosswalks made it difficult for pedestrians by discouraging foot traffic. It also created a situation where it was easier for nearby residents to get around by car than by foot. As Sonya Tilghman of ELDI noted, "if people were going to get in their cars anyway, they seemed to feel they might as well drive further" away to the new suburban shopping malls. The formation of East Liberty Development, Inc. in 1979 and the completion of a community planning process in 1999 helped determine the direction that East Liberty would take towards improvement.



Liberty Bank Building

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[East Liberty Development, Inc.](#)

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[Kolano Design \(2005\)](#)

[Liberty Bank Building \(2005\)](#)

[Red Room Café \(2005\)](#)

[Semple Brown Design \(2005\)](#)

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279 45th Street . Pittsburgh, PA 15201 . 412.683.5790
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